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Killing Kindly: Applying Jens Timmermann's Kantian Ethics of Animal Welfare to the Modern System of Livestock Farming

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Killing Kindly: Applying Jens Timmermann's Kantian Ethics of Animal Welfare to the Modern System of Livestock Farming

INTRODUCTION

Animals are entwined in the lives of humans to a remarkable extent, and domestication is arguably the primary cause.¹ Since the first occasions of domestication approximately ten thousand years ago, humankind has flourished by using meat as a sustainable and dependable source of nutrition.² Perhaps it was our fondness for this staple that delayed our consciences from challenging our perceptions of meat consumption, for it was not until the 18th century that widespread conversation arose regarding human-inflicted animal suffering as a concern.³ Now, in the increasingly ethically-minded world of the 21st century, the relationship between humans and animals is a widely controversial topic, and discourse is prevalent within philosophical and popular writings.

ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to contribute to this conversation in an ethically applicable way, addressing specifically the Kantian vein of animal welfare discussed by Dr. Jens Timmermann in

¹ "Domestication" is defined generally as "the controlled breeding of animal organisms as a means of selecting the traits deemed favorable for human use".

² Larsen, Clark S. *Animal Source Foods and Human Health During Evolution*.

³ Recarte, Ana. *The Animal Rights Movement in the United States: Some Thoughts on a New Ethics*.

his essay *When the Tail Wags the Dog: Animal Welfare and Indirect Duty in Kantian Ethics*.⁴ In Part I, I will examine the work Timmermann undertakes to extend greater protection to animals under Kantian ethics. I will also raise a critical question concerning Timmermann's unwillingness to apply his advancements to the animal welfare problems in our modern world. In Part II, I will attempt to apply Timmermann's conclusions to the question of using domesticated animals for food. Therein I will demonstrate that, under Timmermann's Kantian ethics, the use of sentient animals to meet nutritional needs is morally acceptable. I will also posit an answer to the inquiry raised in Part I. Finally, in Part III will then expand the applicability of Timmermann's ethics by stipulating a list of necessary conditions in rearing domesticated livestock, so as to ensure the process is morally permissible.

PART I: TIMMERMANN'S EXPOUNDING WORK ON KANTIAN THEORY

In his essay, *When the Tail Wags the Dog: Animal Welfare and Indirect Duty in Kantian Ethics*, Jens Timmermann argues for the obligation to refrain from maltreatment of animals. His thesis states that pain is morally relevant, and animals "deserve our direct and immediate moral concern".⁵ Timmermann defends this claim in three ways: 1) by examining the motivation for animal mistreatment, 2) by rejecting Kant's slippery slope justification for the immorality of animal mistreatment, and 3) by presenting a golden rule argument for sparing animals from pain.⁶

⁴ Much of my interpretation of Timmermann's points could also be applied to Kant's original writings. However, I will focus my arguments specifically toward Timmermann's writings due to a more thorough understanding of, and increased interest in, his modern Kantian interpretation.

⁵ Timmermann, 128

⁶ Timmermann, 134-5

The first point Timmermann raises to demonstrate the moral relevance of pain concerns the motive behind human actions. In imagining a human torturing a dog, Timmermann claims that the sole purpose of the torture is to achieve pain. If such treatment would not subject the dog to pain, the torturer would be uninterested in continuing his actions. Thus, Timmermann concludes, pain and suffering is morally relevant to an individual's decision to act.⁷

Next, Timmermann addresses Kant's slippery slope argument for the immorality of animal abuse. Kant's argument essentially states that the mistreatment of animals is wrong, but only because it disposes human beings to mistreat other human beings – rational beings who possess a right to fair treatment.⁸ Timmermann demonstrates the flaw in this opinion with a thought experiment; what if this logic was applied to God's perfect will? In that case, would it be morally acceptable for God to abuse animals and cause them pain, since God would be at no risk of moral desensitization, and would be no more prone to harming rational beings as a result? Timmermann answers "no". Timmermann recognizes that we find this idea repugnant, and explains that we feel this way because the unjustified infliction of pain is morally wrong in and of itself.⁹

Finally, Timmermann uses the Golden Rule to make an argument for the fair treatment of animals. Consider again the dog abuser from the first example. If the tables were turned, and the abuser was to find himself in the position of lacking rationality, he would desire to be spared the pain of abuse. Thus, Timmermann concludes, there is a moral duty to one's own self-respect to not abuse animals.¹⁰

⁷ Timmermann, 134

⁸ Timmermann, 132

⁹ Timmermann, 134-5

¹⁰ Timmermann, 135

Yet, despite Timmermann's effectiveness in demonstrating that pain is morally relevant to the way humans ought to treat sentient animals, he leaves unmade any practically applicable claim about the permissibility of the current realities of animal treatment.¹¹ After explicitly concluding that Kantianism *can* in fact demand a duty to refrain from causing animals pain, he fails to even speculate about the implications of such a demand.¹²

“We will readily grant that inflicting pain on animals for frivolous or unnecessary scientific purposes is morally bad...[but] whether some animal experiments can be defended for medical purposes remains to be seen; and it is as yet unclear whether we could be justified in painlessly killing animals for food even if farming practices changed sufficiently to reflect our moral convictions”.¹³

Such a conclusion, with little applicability to tangible change, seems curious in the scheme of Timmermann's essay. Why does he end his work without attempting to place judgment on the realities most pertinent to his theory? To answer this question, I believe it is best to apply Timmermann's ethic to his case of the “painless killing of animals for food”, and seek the extent to which the moral relevance of pain felt by animals limits the pursuit of human interests.

PART II: DEFENSE OF THE MORALITY OF USING ANIMALS FOR FOOD

In this section, I will extend Timmermann's Kantian outline to show that the killing of animals for food is morally acceptable in the case that 1) the animal receives no degradation of

¹¹ Timmermann, 141

¹² Timmermann, 141

¹³ Timmermann, 141

quality of life prior to its death, and 2) the methods of slaughter are consistently free of pain or suffering. The foundation of this claim becomes apparent in the following logical progression:

Premise 1: Humans have a duty to their own self-respect to cause no pain to sentient animals.¹⁴

Premise 2: Humans have a fundamental right to satisfy their own survival needs for nutrition, shelter, and clothing.

Premise 3: Humans can't satisfy their own survival needs without the use of living things in general.

Premise 4: Humans have a fundamental right to use living things in general to satisfy their own survival needs (*from P2 and P3*).

Premise 5: To exercise a fundamental right must not contradict any of one's moral duties.

Premise 6: Humans have a fundamental right to use living things in general to satisfy their own survival needs as long as exercising that right does not contradict any of one's moral duties (*from P1, P4, and P5*).

Conclusion: Humans have a fundamental right to use sentient animals to satisfy their own survival needs if it causes no pain to the sentient animals (*from P4, P5, and P6*).

Recall now the question posited in Part I: why does Timmermann conclude the legitimacy of a duty to one's own self-respect, yet refrain from applying his concept to the discussion regarding the morality of killing animals? I wage that Timmermann foresaw that his ethic could be applied in a way that failed to explicitly condemn *killing* and *eating* animals, and was unwilling or unable to address this conclusion within his Kantian framework. This appears to be the case because of Timmermann's focus on the *dog* and the *horse* – both examples of

¹⁴ Timmermann, 140

animals used almost exclusively for companionship or sport – rather than cow or pig, which are mostly used killing and eating.¹⁵ I posit that Timmermann’s original purpose for his essay may have been to address instances of animal abuse only, all the while avoiding the further issues to which his conclusion may be applied. For it is apparent in the line of logic above that when working from Timmermann’s original conclusion as our primary premise, we find the killing of sentient animals for human use morally acceptable, as long as no pain is inflicted upon these animals. With pain resting at the centerpiece of his self-respect-driven argument, Timmermann is simply unable to defend stricter animal rights within his Kantian framework.¹⁶

PART III: IMPLICATIONS FOR DOMESTICATED LIVESTOCK

This essay has so far discussed the Kantian roots of Timmermann’s ethics and demonstrated the ethical merit of using sentient animals as food, granted that these animals do not suffer pain by our doing. The next step is to ask, “What might the absence of pain imply in practice?” There are a few conditions which I believe are most necessary to ensure that the sentient animals truly feel no pain at our hand. Therefore, until these changes are implemented, I would argue that the process of rearing and harvesting animals for food is done so immorally in 99% of cases.¹⁷

The first of these is that the animal must spend the entirety of its life in comfortable conditions. Essentially a response to the horrid living situations that millions of animals in our factory farms find themselves in every day, this condition abolishes the modern methods of

¹⁵ Timmermann, 134

¹⁶ Timmermann, 140

¹⁷ Here, 99% refers to the percentage of the U.S. meat supply produced by Industrial Farm Animal Production (also known as ‘factory farms’) according to a USDA Census.

restrictive caging and filthy, overcrowded housing. Without this method of enclosing the animals, we avoid imposing both psychological and physical distress on the animals.¹⁸

Secondly, it requires that the animal is fed a natural diet. This condition is essential to protecting the quality of life of these animals because of the prevalence of hormones-enriched diets in factory farming. It is because of this “Franken-feed” that chickens develop breast muscles so large that they can’t move, and cows suffer broken bones due to overwhelming body mass. Instituting requirements regarding the animals’ diets will relieve these creatures of the pains of dysmorphic features.¹⁹

Lastly, a pain-free life must end in a pain-free process of slaughter. Current factory farming systems are notorious for methods such as stunning cattle with pressurized bolt guns, and hanging them by hooks through their legs even before they are dead. In a truly pain-free slaughter, death would come first and foremost, as any level of consciousness allowed in an animal would certainly guarantee excruciating pain.²⁰

CONCLUSION

This essay has closely analyzed the Jens Timmermann essay *When the Tail Wags the Dog: Animal Welfare and Indirect Duty in Kantian Ethics*. From Timmermann’s Kantian ethic, this essay has extrapolated that the killing and eating of animals is morally permissible as long as the animals do not suffer by human actions. This, I have posited, is the reason for Timmermann’s hesitation to declare the implications of his theory in his paper. Finally, I have set forth a list of necessary conditions which I believe act as an essential foundation for the morally permissible

¹⁸ *Husbandry Fact Sheet*, Sierra Club

¹⁹ *Husbandry Fact Sheet*, Sierra Club

²⁰ *Husbandry Fact Sheet*, Sierra Club

raising and slaughtering of domesticated livestock. These guidelines, though not necessarily exhaustive of the possible precautions, should be implemented to ensure that the current system of immoral animal treatment is righted, and to fulfill our Kantian duty to our own self-respect.

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